

La Maupin



TEXT BY CAMILLE ROGERS, WITH POETRY BY APHRA BEHN (1640-1689)
MUSIC BY COLIN MCMAHON

I. PROLOGUE

Fair lovely maid, or if that title be
Too weak, too feminine for nobler thee.
Permit a name that more approaches truth,
And let me call you, lovely charming youth.
This last will justify my soft complaint,
While that may serve to lessen my constraint;
And without blushes I the youth pursue,
When so much beauteous woman is in view.
Against thy charms we struggle but in vain
With thy deluding form thou giv'st us pain,
While the bright nymph betrays us to the swain.
In pity to our sex sure thou wert sent,
That we might love, and yet be innocent:
For sure no crime with thee we can commit;
Or if we should—thy form excuses it.
For who, that gathers fairest flow'rs believes
A snake lies hid beneath the fragrant leaves.

II. INTRODUCTION

Bonjour mesdames, messieurs, and the rest of us.

They call me La Maupin, la nouvelle Sappho.
They say I am an exception to my sex, one of those errors of nature:
in the same body the grace of a woman, the energy of a man.

I wore breeches with swagger, my long silk doublet hid my breast.
When I passed, so proud, so handsome, my hand on the hilt of my sword,
all the women turned their heads, smiling,
provocations which delighted me— and gave rise to many stories, true or false:

“After her debut she received thirty amorous letters...”

“She stabbed herself on stage with a real knife,
just to revenge herself on an unfaithful lover...”

“She had a siren’s voice, yet read not a note of music...”
“She ran three men through with just one blow from her sword...”
“Physically, as morally, she was a dragoon;
she handled the blade like a fencing master;
her tongue no less audacious.”

My sorriest defect was passion for my own sex; which led me into scandalous excess.

III. THE FIRST AFFAIR

*For example: I was in Marseilles, working as an actor.
One day I decided I was sick of men in general and of my current lover in particular.*

What delightful contrast if a virago such as me were to show herself about town
in the company of some blonde-tressed maiden.
That evening at the theatre I stopped suddenly in my soliloquy,
full of admiration for a radiant young lady.

During the whole performance I played only for her;
the next day I wrote her the most passionate letter;
two days later I met her, I managed to tell her,
I felt as if I was her sister and I couldn’t live without seeing her.

She answered my letters; allowed me to talk with her an hour at church;
she promised to attend all my performances. It was a scandal in the city.

Oh love! that stronger art than Wine,
Pleasing Delusion, Witchery divine,
Though we of Tyranny complain,
We are all better’d by thy Reign.

Everyone was embarrassed to define the nature of our attachment,
forbidden as they were to reveal the secrets of Lesbos...

Oh love! that stronger art than Wine, etc. . .

*The girl’s parents, wanting to guard against the stirring of ridiculous scandal,
made her enter a convent in Avignon.*

I followed my admirer and, resuming the feminine robes which I had discarded,
applied to be received as a novice, determined to carry off the young lady.
An opportunity soon presented itself.

One of the nuns died, and was buried in the convent;
with my own hands I disinterred the corpse, laid it in the bed, and set fire to the chamber.
In the confusion we made our escape.

Oh love! that stronger art than Wine,
Pleasing Delusion, Witchery divine. . .

*I don't remember what happened to that sweet girl. The end of the story is lost.
Somehow I escaped the long arm of the law, and found myself, once again, alone.*

For some time I lived by singing in the towns I passed through.
At length I arrived in Paris,
and after two months succeeded in making my debut at the Opéra.

IV. THE ARTIST

They say I had the finest voice of anyone;
no woman has been found to equal me.
But my bearing made me an ingenue lacking gentleness,
a lover too skillful to pretend sincerity;
they liked me best either as a warrior or a madwoman.

Wearing helmet and breastplate, as a fierce and resplendent Amazon,
my voice was heard in all its splendour: Campra* used my lowest notes beautifully.

*André Campra was the composer of the opera *Tancrède*, in which Maupin starred in 1702.

V. THE DUEL

Among those who frequented the green-room is a certain vain, conceited baron:

*"I should tell you about all the fair ones
who have so sweetly fallen victim to my passions.
One particularly succulent dancer just waiting for me to pluck her from the chorus. . ."*

"Truly, I admire the patience of these worthy gentlemen.
Your insolent falsehoods demand not only refutation, but prompt chastisement.
You are an infamous liar."

"And, pray, might I ask who you are, sir?"

(Dressed in my doublet and hose, I looked a tall, imposing young cavalier.)

"A better gentleman than you, and one ready to give you a useful lesson."

"I'll see you regret that challenge, sir!"

One, two, three, four, etc. . . thirteen.

Pianist: *"Make ready! Fire!"* [gunshot]

My lesson was effectual.
The baron left with one arm broken by my pistol-shot.
When he discovered that a woman had vanquished him
he quietly retired from Paris to his estate.

VI. THE LAST LOVE

At the height of my fame, many great lords aspired to have me at their musical soirées.

The desire to hear me, to see me, to approach me, seized the Countess de Florensac; she was troubled by my boyish appearance, and I admired her grace. They said the number of our former lovers would jade us for ordinary love; yet I had no difficulty in training Madame de Florensac in the curiosity of promised delights. . .

Joys which were everlasting,
And every vow inviolably true:
Not kept in fear of gods' religious cause,
Nor in obedience to the duller laws.

For two years we lived in that tenderness, ideal, ethereal,
out of reach of the defilement of men:
we isolated ourselves, enamoured with each other.

Ideal, ethereal, enamoured. . .

My retirement from the stage was occasioned by the sudden death of the Countess. I bitterly mourned the loss of this sweet lady who had honoured me with her friendship, and I asked for my leave to retreat to a distant district.

VII. EPILOGUE

It's unlikely that all these stories are true. But it's possible, and my heart clings to that possibility. Because if someone wrote it down, that means someone dreamed it up. I'm no more or less correct than the dusty Victorian historians, pulling their hair out over the sheer scandal of it all.

In the end, I get to decide what I believe. The Maupin I know may not be real, but I still reach out to her, across the centuries. I need to believe in her, so I can believe in myself.

Fair lovely maid,
Against thy charms we struggle, but in vain.
Justify this soft complaint,
That we might love, and yet be innocent:
For who, that gathers fairest flow'rs believes
A snake lies hid beneath the fragrant leaves.